hiraeth

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by GatheringBlue

Summary

hiraeth (hee-ryth): a profound, nostalgic longing or homesickness for a home, place, or time that may never have existed or is lost forever

“Do– Do you miss it?” Shane asked him carefully, tilting his head up so he could look Ilya in the eye. “Russia.”

He wanted to brush the question off. To assure his husband that he didn’t miss the country in the slightest – because knowing Shane, if Ilya confessed that he did, he’d spiral into a guilt trip faster than Ilya could blink. Shane would probably believe him too.

But he didn’t want to lie to his husband, or hide his feelings from him. They’d done that for so long, and Ilya was tired of it.

“Mm, I don’t miss Russia,” he said slowly, searching his brain for the exact words he wanted to say. It was hard enough communicating his feelings as it was, but the fact that he had to do so in English made it even harder. Finding the words he wanted to say always seemed so exhausting. “But… I miss how it was when I was little. With my mother.”

Home to Shane Hollander is a very different concept than it is for Ilya. To Shane Hollander, home was a cozy, inviting house just outside of Ottawa, a place where he'd been raised with nothing but love and care by two people who loved him more than anything in the world. To him, home was the place where nothing in the world could go wrong, where he was safe and protected.

To Ilya, home was a far more difficult concept to grasp.

The only true home he'd ever known, the only real love and care he'd had growing up, had died with his mother. It vanished with her, lost forever, never to be recovered.

The cold, looming manor he'd grown up in was not the sort of place one would describe as a home. It had silence, where the Hollander house always had laughter. Cold, unyielding marble floors instead of soft rugs, ones that protected little knees learning how to walk and made the perfect place to sprawl on for a family movie night, rather than the marble that only ever left Ilya's knees bleeding when he fell. It was the type of place where arguments were ended by a harsh, forceful hit instead of a hug.

For years, whenever Ilya talked about home, he simply meant Russia. Moscow was where he'd grown up. It was more home than Boston was. The fierce, cold winters, the strolls along the Moskva, the familiar flow of Russian out of everyone's mouths, that was what made it home. Familiarity.

There was nothing wrong with Boston. Not really. It had just never felt like home. At first, Ilya had blamed it on the language barrier. His English had been good enough when he arrived, or so he thought, but soon he'd realized that trying to carry conversations all day, every day, in his second language was downright exhausting. And no matter how much he talked, no matter how many words came out of his mouth, he never felt like he was saying exactly what he wanted to. The message always ended up blurring along the way.

But that feeling of not being at home didn't ease once his English improved. After that, he blamed the food. He'd replaced the borscht and pelmeni he'd eaten his entire life with burgers and pasta - not exactly the most American food in the world but Boston's North End meant Italian food was practically unavoidable in the city.

He'd started cooking on his own more, trying to recreate the recipes his mother had made during his childhood. They were never quite the same as he remembered though, always leaving an odd taste in his mouth afterward.

Eventually, he'd resigned himself to simply never feeling at home outside of Russia. After all, it was where he was born and where he'd been raised. Surely, every immigrant felt like this. Out of place, adrift, longing for a way back home.

It wasn't until he and Hollander had finally started become something more that Ilya finally realized just how fucked his definition of home was. How wrong it was that to him, home was a city, rather than a house filled with a family.

“I wouldn’t be able to go home again,” he explained, knowing exactly how poorly things would turn for him if the people of Russia found out he was in love with a man. “Ever. Do you get that?”

From the immediate look of confusion on Shane’s face, he could tell he didn’t. Shane’s fears about coming out revolved around hockey. The impact it would have on his dreams, on his goals, on winning another Cup. For Ilya, his fears were far more terrifying.

“Because of your family?” he asked, and Ilya sighed in frustration.

He wasn’t really annoyed with Shane. How could he be? It’d be like being mad at a cute, little puppy that didn’t know what it’d done wrong. Especially when the man had turned those stupidly soft, brown eyes on him, looking at Ilya like he was about to break apart at any moment.

It was simply the reality of their situation. Ilya’s only home, or the only one he had left, was a place defined by mere borders on a map, and nothing more. Hollander’s was his family.

When Ilya had said home, Shane hadn’t immediately thought about Russia. No, he was assuming Ilya couldn’t go home because his family wouldn’t approve. As though the problem was that Ilya would be kicked out onto the streets. And while that was partially the problem, it certainly wasn’t what Ilya had meant. His father’s house hadn’t been home in a long time.

To Hollander, that was the worst possible scenario about coming out. Losing his family, even if that was a highly unlikely scenario. But that was how Canada was.

For Ilya, the worst case scenario in Russia – and a highly likely one at that – was death.

“Because Russia!” Ilya explained loudly, his temper boiling over. But his anger wasn’t at Shane. No, it was at the unfairness of the situation he’d found himself in. “I would not be able to go back to Russia!”

Shane went quiet for a moment before hesitantly asking his next question, as though he didn’t want to know the answer.

“What would happen to you?”

The mere thought of being outed while in Russia was enough to nearly make him sick. He couldn’t say for certain what would happen. Had he been asked years ago, he would’ve said his father would kill him. Now, the man was so far gone he didn’t even remember who Ilya was. Perhaps Alexei would be the one to do it. Ilya wasn’t sure he’d have the guts to do it himself though. His brother had always been a coward. No, he’d probably turn Ilya over to whatever angry mob appeared first, and then that’d be it for him. Death, either by a hanging, or being dragged through the streets, or some other awful way to go out.

“I don’t want to find out,” he confessed, swallowing heavily against the nausea waging a war in his stomach.

The thought of losing Russia shouldn’t have terrified him so much.

His father hated him. His brother hated him. These were the simple facts of Ilya's life. It didn't matter if every other man, woman, and child in Russia put Ilya Rozanov on a pedestal, acting like he was some sort of national hero just for playing hockey.

Despite how hard he tried to make the man proud, it was never enough

So, really, there was no reason for him to fear losing Russia. His father would be dead soon enough. Alexei hated his guts. Ilya's only real friend from Russia was Svetlana, but she came to visit him often enough.

And then there was, of course, the small matter of the fact that he'd probably be killed or at least imprisoned if anyone ever discovered his secret.

It was almost funny, the way life worked in the Motherland. It was a country that had seen some of the worst humanity had to offer. Wars, famines, the Great Purge. Stalin killed a million Russians and remained adored by many. The Romanov children had been slaughtered just to end a monarchy, and the nation had cheered in the face of their deaths.

But Ilya Rozanov, one of the greatest hockey players to ever come out of Russia, a symbol of national pride and glory, loved a man.

And in the eyes of Russia, that was worse than any crime he could ever commit.

So why, really, was he so loyal to a place that would stab him in the back the moment they knew the truth about him?

Because losing Russia, well, that meant losing the only reminders he had left of his mother. The only scraps of the home he'd once had.

He told himself that he'd be willing to lose everything for Shane. Russia, the little family he had left, hockey, it didn't matter. But when you lose everything that makes you recognizable, you end up losing yourself.

And for a while, Ilya had truly lost himself. But then, once the truth was out, once he and Shane were actually together, he was finally able to find his way back to himself.

With the way everything went down – Hayden accidentally leaking the video of them, their sudden coming out – Ilya never really got to say goodbye to Russia. He'd always thought that, one day, before the world knew the truth, he'd go back for a final trip.

Now, he never will.

But that was fine. It was a choice he'd made a long time ago. Shane or Russia.

And the choice between Shane and Russia?

Well, that had never really been a choice at all.

They got married in July, on a warm summer's day, and Russia was the very last thing in Ilya's mind as he married the love of his life.

It seemed it wasn't much of a present thought in his husband's mind either, since Shane doesn't dare to broach the subject until several months later, just a few short days before Christmas.

Christmas in Canada was very different from the one that Ilya had grown up with. For starters, it was in December, not January. He doesn't really remember the holiday much before his mother died, and afterwards, his father had stopped any celebrations they might have had altogether.

But the Hollanders, well, they went all out. David spent days before Christmas carefully planning and perfecting their dinner. Yuna shopped for everyone's gifts weeks in advance. And then, they all spent the day together at Yuna and David's cottage, tucked away from the rest of the world. Usually, they end up turning on the football game, since no one in the NHL played on Christmas Day, but David was really the only one who paid any attention to the sport. Ilya had never really bothered trying to understand American football and although David had tried to explain it, he still found the game dull.

The first Christmas he'd spent with the Hollanders, Ilya had been a nervous wreck, unsure of what a normal family celebrating the holiday looked like, and certain that he was intruding on their time alone as a family.

Shane, David, and Yuna had, of course, eventually convinced him otherwise, and eventually, he'd begun to look forward to the holiday.

He woke up on the morning of the 23rd – perhaps not what most people would call Shane and Ilya's anniversary, but a day that was still special in his heart – to his favorite sight in the world, his husband sprawled in bed next to him, watching Ilya with soft, affectionate brown eyes that always made him melt.

"Is creepy, you know?" he informed the man, jaw cracking in a yawn as he stretched his arms above his head. His right arm settled down above Shane's head, and his husband immediately took it as his invitation to scooch closer, resting his head on Ilya's bicep. "Watching me sleep. Like serial killer."

"But it's not creepy when you do it?" his husband retorted with a huff, and Ilya smirked in response, pressing a hand against his heart in feigned offense.

"Who, me? I could never be serial killer."

Shane rolled his eyes, a motion that had no real heat behind it. Such an angry little kitten, his husband. Even when he was truly annoyed, he still looked about as threatening as an abandoned little cat left out in the rain.

“I told my mom we’d be over at 12 for lunch,” he said quietly, and Ilya lifted his head just enough to see the clock on the bedside table that told him it was just after nine. “She wants help wrapping some last minute gifts for the toy drive.”

Ilya chucked fondly, unsurprised that Yuna Hollander was still working to make Christmas better for a bunch of children she’d never met, when most people would have started focusing on their own holidays by now. But that was just Yuna. Generous, kind. She’d thrown herself into running the Irina Foundation with a passion that made Ilya emotional at times. He knew that the foundation was something special to him, how could it not be, but he’d never quite expected it would be so important to other people. And yet, his mother-in-law worked constantly to help others get the support his mother could have used all those years ago, honoring her memory in a way Ilya never could have imagined.

“We never did those when I was young,” Ilya replied, almost without thinking about it. “Toy drives.”

He thought his mother would have, had their family had the money to spare. But money in Russia was tight. Ilya had spent years sending money back to Russia for Alexei and his father, and their extended family, and yet it never seemed to be enough. He’d grown up in a grand enough house, but that had been passed down through generations. His father had made more money than most as part of the police force, but they hadn’t been well off the way people in America were.

“Do– Do you miss it?” Shane asked him carefully, tilting his head up so he could look Ilya in the eye. “Russia.”

He wanted to brush the question off. To assure his husband that he didn’t miss the country in the slightest – because knowing Shane, if Ilya confessed that he did, he’d spiral into a guilt trip faster than Ilya could blink. Shane would probably believe him too. It wouldn’t be the first time Ilya had said he hated Russia after all.

I never want to come back here again.

I fucking hate it here.

And they all fucking hate me.

But he didn’t want to lie to his husband, or hide his feelings from him. They’d done that for so long, and Ilya was tired of it.

“Mm, I don’t miss Russia,” he said slowly, searching his brain for the exact words he wanted to say. It was hard enough communicating his feelings as it was, but the fact that he had to do so in English made it even harder. Finding the words he wanted to say always seemed so exhausting. “But… I miss how it was when I was little. With my mother.”

When he was younger, he hadn’t seen the flaws in his homeland. Sure, he knew enough to realize that his mama was sick, and that his father had a bad temper, but those things had been easy enough to brush over. His mother had made sure of it. She’d taken care of him, loved him, made a home for him that was worth missing. He’d been too young to know about

all the problems within Russia, too little to care about anything other than the fact that he loved how much it snowed in the city, the sight of the sun setting over the river, eating the foods he loved.

He watched Shane carefully, looking closely for any traces of guilt on the man's face and sighing a bit with relief when he found none. His husband worried over so many things, and Ilya refused to add this to the list.

Because the truth was, it wasn't Shane's fault in the slightest. Even if Ilya had never been outed, he still wouldn't have been able to return home. His home, the one he missed, had been lost long before he ever met Shane Hollander. It rested in a cemetery outside Moscow, six feet under cold dirt. His mama was never coming back, and neither was his home.

"Did she like Christmas?" Shane asked, changing the subject. His tone was soft, unbelievably gentle, the way it always was when he spoke of Ilya's mother.

Ilya smiled fondly, heart clenching just a bit as he leaned forward to press a kiss to Shane's lips before moving to play with the man's dark strands of hair. As painful as it was to talk about his mother, he loved that Shane had always tried to learn more about her. Most people, once they learned his mother died of suicide, never broached the subject again, as though that one single action defined her entire life, her entire being. But Shane knew there was more to Irina Rozanov, and that was one of only many reasons why the man owned Ilya's entire heart.

"Da," Ilya confirmed, voice cracking with emotion just the tiniest bit. "It was her favorite."

It was two days later, after they'd had Christmas dinner and everyone had opened all their presents, that it truly sunk in.

Ilya would always miss the home he'd had with his mother, yes. It was an ache that would never heal, a wound that would never completely close.

But here – with his husband, the man he loved with every fiber of his being, curled up against him on the couch as they watched some ridiculous Christmas movie, and his in-laws that loved him just as much as they loved their own son, loved him like his mother had and in the way he'd always wished his father could have – he knew that *this*, these people, were his home.

They loved him, they supported him. They made him laugh. They teased him all the time, and smiled when he dished it back at them.

They were his home.

And he wouldn't trade them for anything in the world.

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